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# Rethinking professionalization: A generative dialogue on CSR practitioners<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Studies of emerging professions are more and more at the crossroad of different fields of research, and field boundaries thus hamper the development of a full-fledged conversation. In an attempt to bridge these boundaries, this article offers a 'generative dialogue' about the redefinition of the professionalization project through the case of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practitioners. We bring together prominent scholars from two distinct academic communities—CSR and the professions—to shed light on some of the unsolved questions and dilemmas around contemporary professionalization through an example of an emerging profession. Key learnings from this dialogue point us toward the rethinking of processes of professionalization, in particular the role of expertise, the unifying force of common normative goals, and collaborative practises between networks of stakeholders. As such, we expand the research agenda for scholars of the professions and of CSR.

**KEYWORDS:** emerging professions; professionalization; corporate social responsibility(CSR); CSR practitioners.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, socioeconomic trends, such as globalization (Faulconbridge and Muzio 2012; Carter, Spence, and Muzio 2015) or digitalization (Brivot, Lam, and Gendron 2014), have completely reshuffled professions and professionalization (Švarc 2016), creating myriads of new occupations while challenging the meaning (Fleming 2015) and operations of traditional professions such as lawyers and

physicians (Fayard, Stigliani, and Bechky 2017). As a result, there is an urge to revisit our understanding of professions and professionalization (Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno 2016). To do so, scholars of professions have recently suggested the study of new 'organizational professionals' (Noordegraaf 2015; Risi and Wickert 2017) or management occupations (Heusinkveld et al. 2018), and new ways

toward professionalization (Heusinkveld et al. 2018: 250, 259).

As a nascent occupation, corporate social responsibility (CSR) practitioners have garnered growing interests across research communities in organization studies (Tams and Marshall 2011; Wright and Nyberg 2012; Strand 2013; Brès and Gond 2014; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017, 2018; Risi and Wickert 2017; Wickert and de Bakker 2018). According to the ILO (2012), almost half of the global workforce will be affected by the transition toward sustainability; 72 million full-time jobs will be lost due to climate change alone, while CSR-related activities will create 25 million jobs. In its broader sense, CSR is affecting professions, organizations, organizing processes, and the way we research and teach these concepts and entities. Furthermore, as a nascent occupation, CSR seems to contradict many of the characteristics commonly associated with classic professions and professionalization, while at the same time showing elements of traditional dynamics such as a strong link between professionalization and institutional change (Meyerson and Scully 1995; Wright, Nyberg, and Grant 2012), constructing new ways to define and defend their credibility (Risi and Wickert 2017), and increased tensions between professional ideologies and market imperatives (Ghadiri, Gond, and Brès 2015; Pagis and Ailon 2017; Carollo and Guerci 2018; Hahn et al. 2018; Vallas and Christin 2018).

In this dialogical article, adapted from the 2018 Academy of Management Annual Meeting Symposium 'New Ways Towards Professionalization: The Case of CSR Practitioners', we focus attention on changes in the 'professionalization project' through the case of CSR practitioners. We do so through an academic dialogue between five internationally renowned scholars working at the boundaries between the fields of CSR and that of professions. This original format allows presenting, discussing, and articulating the latest research insights on CSR practitioners in response to the pressing need to revisit the process of professionalization. In the tradition of 'generative dialogue' (Gerard and Ellinor 2001; Palmer, Benveniste, and Dunford 2007; Petta et al. 2019), we articulate already existing—but still fragmentary—knowledge about CSR practitioners and draw avenues for rethinking professionalization.

## NEW WAYS TOWARD PROFESSIONALIZATION, RENEWED RESEARCH CHALLENGES, AND THE CASE OF CSR PRACTITIONERS

### Professions: a field undergoing massive transformations

In recent decades, the main focus of the professions literature has moved from investigating the characteristics of professionals to studying the dynamics in and around existing professions (Ackroyd 2016; Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno 2016), notably through the 'professionalization project' and its links to institutional change and institutionalization (Suddaby and Muzio 2015). Yet, in the past 30 years, the landscape of professions has changed drastically. First, speed of occupational change has accelerated. New occupational fields are emerging, and old ones are being integrated or redefined (Fayard, Stigliani, and Bechky 2017). Second, models developed in the sociology of professions were largely based on traditional professions (e.g. medicine and law), which often were examined in isolation (Švarc 2016). Although Abbott emphasized the interactive nature of professions, his call for multilevel analysis of the system of relations (Abbott 1988, 1993) remains largely unmet (Anteby et al. 2016). Third, the rise of corporations and retreat of the nation state (Strange 1996; Matten and Crane 2005; Scherer and Palazzo 2011) means that occupations do not operate in isolation as private practises, but professionals are increasingly employed by large bureaucratic organizations (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011; Noordegraaf 2011) and more often constrained by market's rationality (Pagis and Ailon 2017; Vallas and Christin 2018).

Overall, contemporary professions are very different now than they were 30 years ago. Thus, a more contemporary analysis is needed if we are to understand current professionalization processes. Recent research points toward examining new 'corporate professions' such as CSR (Heusinkveld et al. 2018).

### CSR practitioners: reflecting and foreshadowing new ways toward professionalism

In recent years, a growing number of scientific publications have been focusing on the phenomenon of

CSR practitioners (Bondy 2008; Tams and Marshall 2011; Wright and Nyberg 2012; Strand 2013; Brès and Gond 2014; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017, 2018; Risi and Wickert 2017; Wickert and de Bakker 2018), especially as CSR literature faces an emerging 'micro-turn' (Gond et al. 2017; Jones and Rupp 2018; Wang et al. 2016). However, knowledge on these practitioners is still scant. The market for CSR has been growing rapidly since the 1990s (Vogel 2005; Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen 2017), and it is becoming more institutionalized within society (Bondy, Moon, and Matten 2012; Wang et al. 2016). Within corporations, we have witnessed the rise of CSR practitioners (Tams and Marshall 2011). Usually labeled CSR or sustainability managers, these individuals are in charge of devising and implementing CSR policies, programs, and activities at their organization (Maon, Lindgreen, and Swaen 2010), and focus on issues such as climate change (Wright and Nyberg 2017) and the external reporting of CSR information (Vigneau, Humphreys, and Moon 2015).

These in-house practitioners often rely on the services of external CSR consultants to deliver their organizational mandate (Risi and Wickert 2017; Gond, Cabantous, and Krikorian 2018a). Consultants are a key facet of the emerging CSR profession. There are also an increasing number of studies about CSR consultants as key actors in the diffusion of CSR (Windell 2007; Furusten et al. 2013), cultivating change in organizational cultures (Mitra and Fyke 2017), and in the construction of the market for CSR (Brès and Gond 2014). Their active involvement in assigning meaning to CSR has ideological and political implications at a macro-level (Shamir 2005). These 'change agents' (Wright, Nyberg, and Grant 2012), 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson and Scully 1995), or 'internal activists' (Wickert and Schaefer 2015) are inevitably connected to their organizations, be it CSR managers within corporations or consultants in professional service firms.

We have empirical bases to argue that CSR is an emerging occupation, but whether it is a rising profession is still debatable. Based on a functionalist view on professionalism, CSR, along with other new corporate hybrid professions, would not meet the requisite criteria: CSR practitioners struggle to

establish their internal legitimacy and delineate the boundaries of their mandate (Gond et al. 2011, 2018a), they do not have a clear and legitimate jurisdiction, a well-delineated knowledge base, or a common goal of social closure (Risi and Wickert 2017). Some would argue that it is just another management fashion that will eventually pass (Zorn and Collins 2007; Jutterström and Norberg 2013; Guthey and Morsing 2014), or that we are talking about a new market (Vogel 2005; Furusten et al. 2013) instead of a profession.

However, recent trends in the professions literature point toward a redefinition of the professional project following changing nature of work and more dynamic conceptualization of professions (Švarc 2016; Anteby et al. 2016, Suddaby and Muzio 2015), which makes further investigation of the case of CSR intriguing. With up to half of the global workforce being affected by the transition toward sustainability (International Labour Office 2018), professionalization of CSR may have a massive impact on not only what professions mean, but also on the meaning of organizations and organizing processes. Despite interesting research on the managerialization of CSR (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Bondy 2008), the ways and consequence of this professionalization on CSR remain largely unexplored.

We argue that this is largely because studies on emerging professions are often at the crossroad of different fields of research, and therefore field boundaries hamper the development of a full-fledged conversation. Therefore, to exploit fully the promising research opportunity offered by CSR as an emerging occupation to understand the redefinition of the professional project, we need to connect the field of CSR with that of organizational professionals (Heusinkveld et al. 2018).

### Developing theories through 'generative dialogue'

To enable the conversation across boundaries, we set out to initiate a 'generative dialogue' between established scholars interested in CSR practitioners across different research communities. First, developed in management for practitioners in organizations (Gerard and Ellinor 2001; Gergen, Gergen, and Barrett 2004), 'generative dialogue' has been extended as a method to organize the scientific conversation in the field of organization theory (Palmer et al. 2007).

In this latter epistemic orientation, generative dialogue can be understood as a process that acknowledges and creates interaction among different research perspectives on a research topic (Palmer et al. 2007). The goal of such generative dialogue is to create a meaningful, coherent, and integrated knowledge, while also delineating subfield boundaries and fostering multidisciplinary (Palmer et al. 2007; Petta et al. 2019). By opening a generative dialogue in this article, we explore questions around new ways toward professionalization through the case of CSR—who are these practitioners? Are they professionals? How do they create professional legitimacy? What does the future hold? Our objective is to bring together two distinct academic communities to shed light on the disagreements and challenges of resolving the complex subject of new professions and professionalization.

The starting point of this article was a symposium held at the 78th Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Chicago (United States) on Monday, 13 August 2018. To create the conditions of a generative dialogue, the symposium combined academic experts from the field of professions and from the organization theory-focused CSR community. In particular, the panel discussion included Jean-Pascal Gond (CSR), who conducted research with a specific focus on CSR consultants, environmental, social and governance managers, and responsible investors in the UK, France, and Canada; Rahul Mitra (CSR), who has research projects on CSR practitioners in the USA and in India with a particular interest in their communication strategies and global impacts; Daniel Muzio (professions) has been researching and publishing for a decade on new professions and the redefinition of the profession project in the UK and globally; Christopher Wickert (CSR) conducted research in Germany and Switzerland with a focus on CSR practitioners and institutionalization of CSR; and Andreas Werr (professions), who studies professional services firms and emerging occupations in Sweden. We developed a set of guiding questions based on the existing literature on emerging professions and professionalization, and these experts were invited to share and exchange their ideas based on their research. Due to the panel's interactive nature, the audience also considerably enriched the exchange and their questions inspired some fruitful answers that helped form this article. This article

captures the generative dynamics that emerged during this symposium, while making it more structured and more explicitly referenced. We used the recorded audio from the symposium to reorganize the discussion around our initial guiding questions and circulate the manuscript to all the panelists, who as co-authors sharpened and improved the article.

In the remainder of the article, we first reconstruct this generative dialogue among the symposium panelists from the symposium. Their dialogue is structured around four questions designed to take stock of our current knowledge of CSR practitioners and emerging professions in general, and the lessons that can be learnt in new professionalization processes. Second, based on this dialogue, we provide a synthesis of the key learnings that can be drawn from our dialogue. Third, we conclude with current debates and research avenues regarding CSR practitioners and new ways toward professionalization.

## RETHINKING PROFESSIONALIZATION: A GENERATIVE DIALOGUE ON THE CASE OF CSR PRACTITIONERS

- (1) What is a CSR professional (e.g. managers, consultants/career trajectories/fields of work)? What do we know about these individuals?

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** From different research projects (Brès and Gond 2014, 2018; Ghadiri et al. 2015; Gond et al. 2018a), we found that CSR practitioners from different fields (responsible investing, CSR consultancy, and CSR management) resemble more to each other than to their organizational peers. They are 'like-minded' professionals, who share a strong progressive value-set, have acquired a growing knowledge-base, and are affiliated with similar field-level associations (e.g. Global Reporting Initiative). For instance, we found in our research as we were interviewing CSR consultants that they really tried to infuse a kind of soft political reformist ideology into the conversation. When we asked them, 'So you're an activist?', they said, 'No no no, we are not activists, we are professionals also.' When we then responded 'So you're like a standard consultant?', they protested, 'No no no, we're not like a real consultant, because we want to save the planet, we want to make the world better . . .'. They are permanently



navigating and oscillating between these two contradicting discourses, which we called ‘paradoxical identity mitigation’ (Ghadiri et al. 2015). They also operate in-between and across a number of established professions and often circulate across professional spheres creating an interesting ‘revolving doors’ dynamics (e.g. CSR managers becoming CSR consultants) (Brès and Gond 2014, 2018; Ghadiri et al. 2015). In addition, we found this notion of career sacrifice that in particular CSR consultants made to be part of this profession. We found narratives, such as ‘I could have made a fortune if I moved to finance, but it was meaningless to me, and I’m in search of something slightly more purposeful.’ So, these actors seem to be less keen to trade meaningfulness for money than other professionals, even though they clearly perceive this trade-off and are in permanent search for a compromise between contradictory aspirations.

**Andreas Werr:** A couple of years ago, we looked at what kind of consultants were offering services under the CSR label in Sweden and what kind of services they offered (Furusten et al. 2013). We found that CSR is a label, which consultants to a large extent have appropriated. We found that consultants offering services under the label of CSR consulting, and thus positioning themselves as CSR experts, have very different backgrounds. In the consultancies we studied, we found individuals with a disciplinary background in economics, PR/communications, management, toxicology, political science, biology, and law (Furusten et al. 2013). This multidisciplinary dimension of CSR is the one that might differentiate it from other emerging occupations. Other new professions in a sense are more bound to a certain discipline or a body of knowledge. This makes this occupation unique, but also tricky in professionalization terms. If it is not the body of knowledge, what is it then that keeps the profession together?

In addition, as opposed to Jean-Pascal, in our research we observed a large variety of mind-sets. They ranged from those idealists mentioned, but also comprised consultancies where the ideological aspect is not that strong, for example, the top strategy or accounting firms developing specific CSR service (Furusten et al. 2013). CSR consultants in our study were found to have a variety of motivations. Some were highly intrinsically motivated to work for a better cause and typically worked for smaller

idealistically oriented CSR consultancies. For others, typically consultants in the large, well-established multi-disciplinary consulting firms, it was just another area of application of their generic discipline and consulting skills. They do it professionally, and they do it well, but at the end of the day it is just another assignment (Furusten et al. 2013), which is not necessarily bad if they execute their job well.

**Christopher Wickert:** In our past (Wickert and Schaefer 2015; Schaefer and Wickert 2016; Risi and Wickert 2017; Wickert and de Bakker 2018) and ongoing research (Risi and Wickert 2017), we found that CSR managers share first and foremost a common objective: to institutionalize ethical, environmental, or social issues in those organizations in which they work. This is their common denominator, and a uniting feature is the common knowledge base. Whether they are managers or consultants is less important. I think this shared purpose and common objective makes the CSR profession quite unique from a research perspective. This profession is largely driven by an underlying or uniting idealism to change companies for the social good. We have found in conversations with CSR managers, that promoting the cause is more important at times than promoting their own power or status in the organization. We have many statements in interviews when we ask CSR practitioners: where do you wish to be with your organization in 5 or 10 years? They answer: ‘Well I want to be obsolete. I want that I’m no longer needed, because that means CSR is fully implemented in the company.’ And that is quite unique, like a lawyer would probably not say something similar. With CSR managers, we find that promoting the cause is more important at times than promoting their own power or status. We see this in their educational and social backgrounds, for instance, having been environmentalists or social activists, where fairly few just slipped into this job by coincidence but rather saw it as their calling and true passion (the frustration that might come along is obviously another question). Beyond the common objective, the boundaries of the CSR profession are still only emerging, because it is a relatively young profession, which has opportunities and challenges (Risi and Wickert 2017).

**Rahul Mitra:** It is important to track what CSR practitioners really do on the ground. My research

highlights that people who work in CSR positions also engage different stakeholders, both within and outside the organization (Mitra and Fyke 2017; Mitra and Buzzanell 2018). Whether it is with media people, operations personnel, marketing, or activists, there is a whole range of organizational boundaries that CSR practitioners have to engage and negotiate. In agreement with Jean-Pascal, therefore, I regard CSR practitioners first as key boundary-spanners, who must communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, navigating multiple and often competing interests. This boundary-spanning stakeholder interaction is what many CSR practitioners find exciting and meaningful, but also tensional because they must use and adapt to different messaging strategies and vocabularies to be taken seriously—as legitimate—for them to be able to realize their CSR goals (Mitra and Buzzanell 2017). Even within the organizations where they work, there is a blurring of boundaries, with little consensus in terms of who CSR practitioners report to, which division they comprise or must regulate, or even whether their role extends beyond reporting to implementation of key managerial practises.

- (2) Can we talk about a new profession? Or is this just a novel market or management fashion?

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** We need to look at this question in light of the development from what CSR was 50 years ago. In Howard Bowen's foundational book on CSR, *The Social Responsibilities of The Businessman*, he wrote that maybe in the distant future we could think that there will be someone in every corporation in charge of social reporting and doing something relative to social responsibility (Bowen 2013[1953]). Over the last 20 years. I think there has been a massive increase in the number of professional bodies for CSR-related practitioners. So, there is really something that looks to me like a profession. In the UK, for example, there are many organizations dedicated to CSR such as the PRI<sup>2</sup> in the domain of responsible investment, or the Institute of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability. CSR professional associations are emerging around the world, for instance, in Canada (ECPAR—Quebecois Space for the Codevelopment

of responsible procurement) or Collège des directeurs du développement durable or Cercle Éthique des Affaires (two CSR 'think tanks' in France) (see Ben Khaled and Gond 2019). However, I agree, CSR might not fit with the standard definition of profession, for instance, because of its multidisciplinary nature that does not provide a clear-cut and sound knowledge basis, like in the case of accounting or for medical professionals. I think, it relates more to the broader commodification movement (Acquier and Gond 2006; Brès and Gond 2014), in which professionalization is linked to a new market of this fad and fashion (Abrahamson 1996).

**Andreas Werr:** CSR is often described as a multidisciplinary field by the consultants we interviewed (Furusten et al. 2013), involving disciplines such as, science and technology, management, communication, and political science. This makes it difficult to identify a delimited and well-specified knowledge base for CSR experts. Such a knowledge base is generally viewed as a prerequisite for a profession (Abbott 1988). In the case of CSR professionals, if there is a common given goal, a lot of varied knowledge can be used to reach that goal and the required knowledge is very likely to change as we move forward in time (Osagie et al. 2016). Given this multidisciplinary background, and if we still view professions as something held together by a common body of knowledge (Abbott 1988), I have a hard time seeing CSR as a profession. Because if it is not the body of knowledge, what is it then that keeps the profession together? There may be an interesting point here. There seems to be an ideological aspect uniting CSR practitioners. Might there be room for professions or occupations that are united by an ideology and a focus on achieving a specific set of outcomes? What would that be, and how would that connect the professionals?

Another issue in relation to professionalization in a more traditional sense is the claimed need for CSR workers' flexibility. If an important competence of the CSR worker is spotting and dealing with the next CSR challenge (Osagie et al. 2016), then how would you define jurisdictional boundaries around a profession, which has as its essence to be flexible enough to see and address the next thing in terms of social expectations? I think that is one of the challenges around professionalization.

**Christopher Wickert:** It depends on the perspective of course. If you look at the self-identity and the self-understanding of members of the ‘CROA’, the *Corporate Responsibility Officers Association*,<sup>3</sup> and similar bodies, they would certainly consider themselves as professionals. However, if you talk to a lawyer or physician they would not consider CSR practitioners as real professionals. (Risi and Wickert 2017); we look at CSR managers as specific type of ‘organizational professionals’ (Noordegraaf 2015). A growing body of literature (Noordegraaf 2016; Risi and Wickert 2017; Argento, Culasso, and Truant 2018) is trying to establish this new type of profession, which is not linked to a particular issue (e.g. law, medicine) but rather to certain organizational contexts (e.g. the company they work for). Those are professionals but they are not as independent as a lawyer would be, for example. Instead, they are embedded in an organization, working toward a different kind of organizational change from within, as ‘internal activists’ (Wickert and Schaefer 2015), sometimes considering themselves as members of an ‘internal NGO’, as we found in one of our studies (Wickert and de Bakker 2018). I would thus propose that CSR professionals are best characterized as a sub-type of organizational professional with a craft-like knowledge base (Reed 1996). Notably, CSR professionals as broadly understood do not necessarily have to have formal job titles with an explicit reference to CSR, like ‘Head of CSR’ of a company. Rather, we see increasing responsibilities for social and environmental issues in all sorts of job functions, for example, a ‘Sustainability Project Manager’ working in the procurement division of a firm. This of course blurs the boundaries of the professions, but it is a reality that researchers need to address to grasp fully the complexity of this emerging profession.

We observed in our research that the knowledge base and the status of the profession co-evolved very strongly with what is understood as CSR. For example, activities of CSR professionals, if they would have existed 20 years ago, would be much more about philanthropy and making donations strategically. It is now critical for the CSR professionals to try to maintain their status to be at the frontier of knowledge of what is considered state-of-the-art CSR. In the 1990s and 2000s, it was all about supply chain and then it was about political engagement.

Now if you want to maintain a strong position as a CSR manager, you need strong knowledge about the implications of digitalization or the Sustainable Development Goals, which were not really a topic 5 or 10 years ago. If you are a CSR professional, you need to put these issues on your agenda and you need to show to other actors or your counterparts in the organizations that you are the main carrier of knowledge in that area, so that they will need you, because you can tell them what to do. Then in 10 years, we will have other topics. Hot issues evolve dynamically, and so does the status of the professional depending on their ability to be the key drivers and carriers of that knowledge.

**Rahul Mitra:** I regard professions as not static social formations of disciplinary knowledge, but identities and expertise discourses that are reified through ongoing social and organizational practises. For instance, Lammers and Garcia (2009: 358) argue that ‘Professions are occupations as characterized by formalized beliefs that specify and emerge from established practises transcending particular workplaces’. Thus, in my opinion, faced with new stakeholder expectations, organizations have created a new professional class of CSR practitioners. This may well be a managerial ‘fashion’, but such fashions may have far-reaching and unplanned consequences, such as quality control (Zorn and Collins 2007). What gets labeled (and counted) as an emerging profession depends on context for me—not just the industrial context, but also the organizational, geographical, or cultural context at stake.

In a recent publication, my co-author and I looked at how sustainability-minded or environment-focused CSR practitioners positioned themselves, on the basis of their expertise, vis-à-vis different stakeholders (Mitra and Buzzanell 2018). One of the things we found was how commonly used the label of ‘generalist’ was among our participants. Calling themselves generalists helped them straddle those different organizational and disciplinary boundaries; at the same time, it can lead to pushback from some critics saying, ‘Well if you’re everything, then you’re really nothing. What really are you?’ I think this is a tension that some or most CSR practitioners probably have to negotiate, depending on their context.

**Daniel Muzio:** One key distinction we should make here is how we define profession. Is a



profession an analytical category, associated with particular occupational features, such as control of a knowledge base, ethical code, closure regime, and so on? In this case, it may be a little more challenging to view CSR as a profession. But a profession could also be understood as a discursive category, a linguistic resource that occupations claim for themselves, or that is bestowed on them by others for different reasons. If we take this second position, which is increasingly well established (Fournier 1999; Evetts 2003), then of course there is a much stronger case for CSR to be thought of as a distinctive profession in the same way as management consultants, project management, or executive search (Muzio et al. 2011).

Furthermore, whilst professions have usually developed within the confines of specific nation states (Larson 1977; Krause 1996)—whether ‘from below’ as gentlemen associations pursuing shared interests, such as in Anglo-Saxon contexts, or ‘from above’ as part of state sponsored projects (Jarausch 1990; Burrage and Torstendahl 1990)—CSR presents an interesting case of a born global profession as it developed with the confines of large multinational corporations. As argued elsewhere (Suddaby, Cooper, and Greenwood 2007) professionalization is increasingly the result of a new compact between multinational corporations, international trading/standards bodies and social movements and as such due to the combination of these transnational and organizational dimensions (Reed 1996; Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011) these new professions may present radically different characteristics from their historical predecessors

- (3) Can we observe a professionalization in the field? How do these individuals create legitimacy for their work and knowledge?

**Andreas Werr:** From the perspectives of CSR consulting, efforts to formalize a ‘common body of knowledge’ defining the CSR consultant are still rare. Based on the development of professional certifications in the consulting industry more generally (Alexius 2017), I would expect any initiatives toward professionalization of CSR consulting to be driven by individual consultants or small consulting organizations but these often lack the necessary power to

establish binding professional standards. When it comes to the management consulting industry, large and well-established consultancies actually often counteract such initiatives, as they threaten their ability to take advantage of the loosely defined nature of ‘management consulting’ (Furusten and Garsten 2005; Alexius 2017). I believe this is applicable to CSR as well. Many consultants have a lot to gain from not professionalizing. They gladly exploit the rather fuzzy nature of CSR (Jutterström and Norberg 2013), allowing them to relate a broad range of services to this popular management idea.

**Christopher Wickert:** Professionalization of CSR can also be seen from the others’ perception. CSR professionals did a rather good job as now being perceived as strategic change makers. This is very much away from this tree-hugging perception that was prevalent 20 years ago, as some of our earlier research suggests (Wickert and de Bakker 2018). Indicators of professionalization are the institutionalization of the knowledge base—beyond CSR itself. Several developments would support the general perception of what characterizes professionalization across different professions, namely the development of (1) education programs, (2) certification and (3) professional associations (Risi and Wickert 2017). At the University of St. Gallen, for example, where my co-author David works, they have a week-long management course to become a certified CSR manager,<sup>4</sup> and it is a recognized seal that you can stick on your CV as a CSR worker; similar programs at different schools also exist. Professional associations play a critical role in consolidating and formalizing the profession and its knowledge base (Lounsbury 2002). The US-based CROA and the *European Association of Sustainability Professionals* (EASP) are some of the most well-known examples.

**Rahul Mitra:** Broadly speaking, I think of emerging professions as a mixture of both stable and unstable, and formal and informal ways of doing things—what Bechky (2011) calls ‘negotiated orders’. Yes, there are policy documents and institutional structures, norms, and practises. Professional associations, like the International Society of Sustainability Professionals (ISSP), organize activities such as conferences, webinars and training workshops, and publish state-of-the-field job and salary reports (see <https://www.sustainabilityprofessionals>).

org/). However, what becomes important for professionalization of emerging professions are those user-defined everyday interactions and discursive positions. Two of those positions stand out, in my opinion. First, legitimacy in CSR professionalization depends on consistent use of key communicative practises and motifs, like modes of address, use of logos and other symbols, or citation of recognized authorities (Mitra 2011). Because of their boundary-spanning role, CSR practitioners must be versatile in how they position themselves through such communicative practises and motifs, so that they might enact different forms of legitimacy—for instance, based on lived experience, or knowledge of key organizational numbers, or networking with influential actors—with different stakeholders (Mitra and Buzzanell 2018). Second, I have found that a lot of CSR practitioners are actively policing others in the field, and even their clients if they were consultants. Greenwashing, or the inauthentic certification of organizational operations as being socially responsible, just for the accolades, or without any real commitment to society and the environment, was something that every CSR practitioner is very aware of. Participants in my research felt they could not allow this sort of thing to happen, because it gave the entire profession—and by extension, their own work—a bad reputation (Mitra and Buzzanell 2017; Mitra and Fyke 2017). So informal policing of each other's work was important to develop a more professional way of doing CSR work.

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** I think the question of authority relates also to the dynamics of institutionalization and we tend to overlook the fact that a lot of CSR topics are nowadays regarded as mainstream strategic topics by CEOs (Gond et al. 2018a). CSR made its way into board rooms. There are a lot of people speaking in the name of CSR, and some of them being in position of authority (Gond et al. 2018a). If you look at institutional investors, you can observe some of this dynamic (Gond et al. 2018b). Last year, BlackRock, the largest investor in the world exhorted corporations to behave in a socially responsible business or risk losing their support (BlackRock 2018). We can observe elements of professionalization or institutionalization notably through its appropriation by people in position of authority. In addition, like Rahul, we noticed the importance of certain

practises. One powerful process is what we have labelled 'strategifying work' that consists of legitimizing and embedding CSR within devices that matter to corporate strategy making (Gond et al. 2018a). Instead of strategizing. Strategifying is about trying to expand the boundaries of strategy or the spaces that are legitimate and that have authority on the organizational strategy, so that you can progress with specific activity as a profession. We found that numerous CSR professionals have been successfully engaged in strategifying work. Linked to self-policing, we found with Luc Brès that hard and soft regulations are central to these dynamics (Brès and Gond 2014), as well as management tools (Gond and Brès 2019). They all provide frameworks that enable strategifying work.

**Daniel Muzio:** An interesting question is being raised here: How important is a unified knowledge base? I think this also leads to what the case of CSR says about professionalism in general, and whether we need to rethink some of our ideas here.

The label of organizational professional (Reed 1996) is quite useful in terms of thinking of these practitioners as solving problems for a particular corporation. It is a good starting point, but we probably need to move beyond that. I think Jean-Pascal's and Christopher's point on ideology is useful. I kept wondering, what is the difference here between this profession and a social movement? Some have already distinguished issue fields (e.g. Hoffman 1999; Howard-Grenville, Hoffman, and Wirtgenberg 2003), which are structured around solving a common problem, as opposed to more functional understandings of fields which are structured around power struggles and competition over status and resources (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Similarly, Henriksen and Seabrooke (2016) have proposed the idea of issue professionalism, whereby professionals, share a normative mission and come together to address a common problem such as a societal grand challenge. These professions behave more like a social movement than the self-interested monopolistic cartels depicted by the sociology of the professions (Johnson 1972; Larson 1977; Abbott 1988). In this context, I wonder whether the example of normative occupations such as CSR should encourage a rethinking of categories such as professionalism or professionals as these have been traditionally

understood. I'm thinking about the works of Eyal (2013), also Brady (2018), which suggest we should not focus on experts, but on their expertise, regardless of who controls this, and on the network relationships linking the actors, institutional contexts, practises and technologies through which this expertise is actually put in place.

- (4) What is the future of the CSR emerging profession?

**Christopher Wickert:** Surprisingly, we found that the more important CSR becomes for a specific organization, the less important CSR professionals may become (Risi and Wickert 2017). This is because as the practise of CSR institutionalizes and becomes commonly understood, CSR managers who initially pushed the idea and acted as important organizational change agents withdraw from the day-to-day execution of CSR, and it is increasingly addressed by other managers in functional departments. Also, a higher hierarchical position of the CSR manager or department does not necessarily mean that CSR is more institutionalized in the organization. In fact, we found that the position of CSR managers is rather diminished as CSR institutionalizes, because it evolves in a decentralized manner. The knowledge that the CSR manager carries is passed to functional departments, marketing, procurement, and so on. CSR becomes an attribute in the job description of procurement employees for instance. It is no longer the responsibility of the CSR manager. The more knowledge about CSR is passed through the organization, the less important CSR manager's active involvement becomes. However, when new CSR issues emerge, CSR managers have an opportunity to reestablish themselves as critical experts for an upcoming issue. For instance, SDGs as well as everything related to digital responsibility are hot issues at the moment and are becoming stronger on corporate CSR agendas. Thus, CSR managers of a firm that had already absorbed substantial amounts of CSR-related knowledge might become more important again as carriers of that emerging knowledge. In fact, in our research (Risi and Wickert 2017), we are not arguing that the profession will disappear, but rather the question is, how likely is it that it will have a high or low status position? Or will it have a

central position in the organization, or will it have a peripheral position in the organization? We believe the future of the CSR profession critically depends on the profession's ability to expand their knowledge base: To constantly integrate new issues on the CSR agenda of which they are the primary carriers of knowledge. If they co-evolve with new knowledge and continuously integrate new hot topics and then pass it on to the organization, they will be central. However, they always need to pass some new kind of knowledge. That is what we meant by their ability to expand their knowledge base.

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** I do not believe the CSR profession will disappear anytime soon because vast set of social and environmental issues still remain. My argument will be as the one sometimes mentioned about health and safety officers or in medical school or other caring jobs. Many professionals are fighting cancer but if we get rid of cancer, it does not mean that we will not need physicists, for instance to analyze tumors. I do not think that because you try to eradicate an issue, it necessarily hampers the professionalization dynamic, especially in a context where social and environmental issues that are becoming more and more salient. It means, unfortunately, that something that is here to last, which is permanently nurtured by the new 'overflows' of the capitalist systems (Callon 1998). So how I see that is you have these negative externalities. The capitalist system tries to reinternalize them, sometimes with market mechanisms (Callon 2017). When you do that, you need new professionals in order to do the job. However, they may do more than just building markets or commodifying concepts, as these actors can contribute to re-socializing actors to issues that were ignored before and translate hard and soft regulations in practise (Brès and Gond 2014).

On the other hand, I think you lose necessarily in an institutional process or in a professionalization process, when you move from the margin to the mainstream, also in terms of authenticity. Maybe that relates to identity and professional identity constitutions, and maybe that is something we should look at a little more closely. The notion of authenticity in the case of CSR (McShane and Cunningham 2012), I think is an interesting research avenue for the professionalization. There is a trade-off between legitimacy and authenticity. The more successful the

profession becomes, the more people may join it but for different reasons. In addition, there is a paradox of intentions. If you professionalize, you lose your capacity for real adaptation because it becomes like business as usual. An article called 'An Inconvenient Truth: How Organizations Translate Climate Change into Business as Usual' (Wright and Nyberg 2017) describes well this paradoxical 'threat' to authentic and genuine commitment for sustainability created by the professionalization of sustainability within organizations.

**Rahul Mitra:** Multiple avenues are possible, as evident right now. CSR is becoming both more institutionalized and, arguably, more meaningless, when corporate interests supersede social concerns at (almost) every turn (Zorn and Collins 2007; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017). As it becomes part of management structure (e.g. Chief Sustainability Officers), both the limits and potential of CSR as an organizational practise are yet unclear and thus emergent. A fascinating avenue for research regarding future professionalization of CSR concerns emerging economies. Historically, in India, CSR has been practised as philanthropy (Mitra 2012). Five years since the country started mandating large companies to spend 2% of net profits on CSR, there is a strong push toward non-profit management and CSR management (Mitra and Warshay 2015; Gautam 2018). Similarly, in China, practitioners and scholars have long averred that meaningful CSR requires top-down emphasis from the central government in Beijing, despite Confucian precepts being generally pro-CSR (Ip 2009). In recent years, with Beijing actively advocating for 'harmony' to be a guiding principle in business–society–environment relationships (Long et al. 2015), it will be interesting to see what role CSR professionals play not only at their organizations but also in society at large.

Ultimately, does professionalization of CSR mean that it is becoming more managerial? The push toward professionalization involves more emphasis on facts and figures to measure, evaluate and hold CSR accountable, but they can also be construed in a very narrow and overly budgetary way to rationalize CSR—what Stan Deetz (1992) critiqued as 'managerialism'. This might lead to—and has arguably already resulted in—devaluing the social and environmental justice reasons for CSR, in favor of a

parochial and numbers-centered way of thinking how and why CSR should be implemented, what is the permissible timeline and cost, and what the company can expect to get out of it (Chelli and Gendron 2013). I think that is a question that ultimately should be asked.

**Andreas Werr:** In the early phases of the establishment of CSR, the term, as a popular management idea, attracted interest and engagement, with claims to the term, from a very broad range of actors. As the field is maturing, we observed that the knowledge base and the status of the profession strongly co-evolved with what was under the umbrella of CSR. However, there is a risk that commercial interests, especially from the large consulting firms, will resist such a convergence. Currently, I am not convinced that CSR is a profession in the first place, at least not in a traditional consensual sense (Abbott 1988). Neither am I convinced it would be a good thing for CSR to become a profession in that sense. That being said, an interesting question is how CSR affects the established professions and occupations within organizations? Because, I would say this is how CSR would have the most impact on organizations. Take for instance, accounting or finance, how do they approach CSR, and how does CSR change these professions/occupations? I think it is at least as interesting and important for the literature on professions and occupations as how CSR is developing into a profession (if at all).

**Daniel Muzio:** In a way, the success of this profession in addressing the underlying grand challenges connected to CSR could lead to its own redundancy. So here, there is a paradox as the effectiveness of this profession may eventually undermine the rationale for its very existence. Although it is of course difficult to imagine this scenario in the current context. But this again links to my previous point on the nature of CSR as an example of 'issue professionalism'. Again, drawing on Eyal (2013), issue professions like CSR or diversity management may be guided by the principle of generosity rather than the pursuit of occupational closure. These occupations do not want to close off and monopolize opportunities. Well, some of them may, but as a rule, they are much more concerned with their normative mission, with solving a societal issue in which they passionately believe. As such, they do not necessarily aim to achieve



closure in the same way that lawyers and accountants and so on did. Advancing the CSR agenda may be more important than controlling it. Thus, overall, I think examples of occupations like CSR show how we should pay more attention to cooperation, solidarity, and collegiality between and within professions (Suddaby and Muzio 2015; Henriksen and Seabrooke 2016) rather than closure and exclusion.

## PROFESSIONALIZATION AND CSR: KEY LEARNINGS

### Insights for the professions literature

Our dialogue exposed why an emerging profession like CSR can hardly have a well-delineated professional knowledge base: first, because of its multidisciplinary nature (Furusten et al. 2013; Gond and Brès 2019); second, because CSR practitioners are busier charting new knowledge and passing it onto traditional professions than consolidating a knowledge base (Osagie et al. 2016; Risi and Wickert 2017). This allows CSR professionals to act as knowledge brokers for traditional professions (Risi and Wickert 2017), but at the same time this undermines their ability to secure a specific knowledge base. This has repercussions for traditional ways of professionalizing that makes this feature a necessary requirement (through credentialing and licensing) for winning jurisdictional battles and achieving monopoly (Abbott 1988). The continuously expanding expertise (abstract knowledge, control of technique, and other bases following Abbott's wider definition) within CSR should indeed be seen as a network connecting various stakeholders (e.g. in-house professionals, consultants, and NGOs) (Eyal 2013) instead of an attribution or skill that is required to win jurisdictional battles, or to make sense of the multidisciplinary nature of the field. As a result, we need to revisit definitions from the sociology of the professions that emphasize the importance of well-delineated expertise controlled by experts as a prerequisite for professionalization (Abbott 1988), and for emerging professions in particular. The case of CSR also implies a new type of relation between knowledge and professionalization. Our dialogue leads to the idea of a fluctuating legitimacy for emerging professions, one that follows the cycle of adoption of profession-related management ideas

within organizations. The case of CSR also reveals how emerging and traditional professions interact, in particular around management ideas' life cycle (Furusten et al. 2013; Risi and Wickert 2017).

Besides the knowledge base, there are increasingly well-established alternative definitions for professions in the literature. In particular, profession can be defined as a linguistic resource for new occupations, as in the case of project managers for instance (Muzio et al. 2011). From this perspective, professionalization can be understood as a process through which such linguistic resource can be credibly endorsed and reinforced by individuals. Three constitutive elements for this process stand out from our dialogue: common values (Wright et al. 2012; Gond et al. 2017), similar patterns of professional identity construction (Wright et al. 2012; Ghadiri et al. 2015), and daily professional practises (Tams and Marshall 2011; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017).

Daily professional practises seem critical in new ways toward professionalization (Lammers and Garcia 2009). Our discussion spotted a number of important practises for professionalization, namely creating networks (Mitra 2011), self-policing and policing each other (Brès and Gond 2014; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017), and strategifying, that is, making CSR 'strategic' for organizations (Gond et al. 2018a). An interesting insight from research on CSR professionals is the critical importance of consistency in practises and discourses in the community of individuals claiming to be CSR professionals (Mitra and Buzzanell 2018). Possibly, there are specific practises and skill sets that fit well with a particular emerging profession (Osagie et al. 2016), and that define this profession in return.

The case of CSR also shows how a common normative goal can serve as a sufficient uniting force for emerging professions (Windell 2010; Risi and Wickert 2017). In this sense, CSR can be described as a collaborative occupation, in which, professionalization relies more on solidarity, collegiality, and cooperation (even with other professions) (Adler, Kwon, and Heckscher 2008; Brady 2018). This is in opposition to our view of traditional accounts of professions as 'self-interested cartels' in the sociology of professions (Johnson 1972), where the professionalization dynamic is more about hierarchy and closure over a well-delineated professional jurisdiction



(Suddaby and Muzio 2015). The fact that researchers, who contributed to this dialogue, encountered numerous self-narratives of sacrifices in achieving these professional goals during their interviews with CSR professionals substantiate this point. Overall, our dialogue calls to move beyond the conflictual perspective of cross-occupational relations and investigate generative dynamics (Adler, Kwon, and Heckscher 2008; Okhuysen and Bechky 2009; Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno 2016).

Another series of important takeaways from our dialogue regards the importance of market dynamics and stakeholders in the professionalization of emerging professions. First, studies on CSR practitioners point toward a tighter coupling between emerging professions and markets' evolution (Acquier and Gond 2006) at least regarding two very distinct understanding of markets. First, the general necessity to handle markets' harmful externalities or 'overflow' (Callon 1998), such as social and environmental issues in the case of CSR, sustains a constant demand for new occupations; second, the specific market of management ideas constantly produces fads, fashion, and new 'professionals' that are eagerly consumed by organizations (Abrahamson 1996), where CSR is being 'sold' (Wickert and de Bakker 2018). However, this is an ambiguous relationship. Yes, externalities and management fashion may create professional opportunities (Windell 2007; Gond and Brès 2019; Callon 2017), but commodification causes professional tensions (Ghadiri et al 2015; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017), while fads and fashions threaten the professionalization process (Zorn and Collins 2007) as in our case CSR might be considered just a new management idea (Jutterström and Norberg 2013; Alexius, Furusten, and Werr 2017). Second, stakeholders appear critical for the credibility and legitimacy of emerging professions. As state involvement remains limited and self-regulation continues to be important (cf. Evetts 2002), legitimacy is sought from alternative sources. As for other professions (for instance, quality management), organizations often open CSR positions in response to stakeholder expectations. Numerous case studies show how CSR professionals established their legitimacy by positioning themselves in relation to stakeholders as negotiators of boundaries or as pacifiers (Mitra and Fyke 2017; Mitra and Buzzanell 2018).

This view on professionalization links back to Abbott's ideas on the importance of networks for professions (Abbott 1988, 1993), although the case of CSR shows that the system is not necessarily characterized by occupational groups competing for jurisdictional control over certain tasks anymore.

### Insights for the CSR literature

Our dialogue flagged a number of insights and raised questions around CSR practitioners and new ways of professionalizing for the CSR literature. While we observe precursory signs of professionalization (Risi and Wickert 2017), there is also a possible decoupling between CSR becoming institutionalized (Bondy, Moon, and Matten 2012; Wang et al. 2016), on the one hand, and CSR professionals gaining influence on the other (Risi and Wickert 2017). As CSR grows into an important business topic, it steps outside of the 'corridors of indifference' (Westley and Vredenburg 1991: 86). As a result, other occupations and professions may obstruct its professionalization blurring further the boundaries of its jurisdiction. For instance, as Andreas argued, large consulting firms may rather keep the fuzziness of CSR in order to exploit it as another management idea (Jutterström and Norberg 2013). The dialogue indicates the existence of a common ideological goal and a unifying professional identity—some type of 'professional ethos' (Fayard, Stigliani, and Bechky 2017)—that is upheld by the members of this occupation (Mitra and Fyke 2017). The panelists reflect on a number of factors that play a key role in these 'new' ways of professionalizing: the importance of integrity and consistency in discourse and practises (Mitra 2011), self-policing (Mitra and Buzzanell 2018), CSR management tools (Gond and Brès 2019), and hints toward the potential of soft laws (Brès and Gond 2014).

The discussion also challenges the idea that CSR should actually professionalize. Discussing our different research insights, we found that the professionalization of CSR may come at a price. First, there is a tension between authenticity and legitimacy (McShane and Cunningham 2012). One interesting hypothesis that emerged from our discussion is that as CSR is becoming more legitimate, it attracts more workers, and it becomes more encompassing. CSR as a field of practise in organizations is booming with

the creation of many sub-professions and the constant integration of new 'hot' topics, such as big data for instance (Corporate Citizenship 2018). Up until now, research showed that most CSR professionals used to have a background as activists (Brès and Gond 2014; Risi and Wickert 2017; Mitra and Buzzanell 2018), and would often describe themselves as 'internal NGO' (Wickert and de Bakker 2018) and manage their career with an overall goal of social impact (Tams and Marshall 2011). This could change with the professionalization of CSR. In this regard, the Swedish context might prefigure the future of the CSR profession. Researchers have found that CSR consultants in Sweden were idealists only to a very limited extent (Furusten et al. 2013), and as Andreas underlined, CSR practitioners can be dispassionate and nonetheless be very effective in making CSR. We can safely assume that this transformation from a more social movement-oriented group of practitioners into a more mainstream profession will require significant identity mitigation (Ghadiri et al. 2015).

Second, there is a tension in relation to the managerialization of CSR, a process that translates social issues into managerial rhetoric and practises following a logic of rationality, efficiency, and profit maximization (Abrahamson 1996; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001). Managerialism tends to promote a narrower, simplified view of issues devoid of any conflictual dimension and subsumed to corporate interests (Deetz 1992). CSR literature already shows how the casualization of CSR trivializes the challenges associated with this area (Wright and Nyberg 2017). As CSR becomes business as usual, there is an important risk that companies' interest supersedes social concerns (Mitra and Buzzanell 2017; Zorn and Collins 2007). However, the rationalization of CSR can also be seen more positively if it means a more fact-based approach to CSR, an ability to monetize CSR, and hence to show its value to decision makers in organization (Chelli and Gendron 2013). Rationalization can also help capture more objectively the social and environmental impact of CSR initiatives. In addition, the integration of CSR into the managerial rhetoric can be seen as a first step in the process of 'strategifying' CSR (Gond et al. 2018a), thus making CSR more important in broader organizational decisions.

## CONCLUSION: UNSOLVED QUESTIONS, TENSIONS AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

This generative dialogue also exposed a number of unsolved questions, disagreement, dilemma, and uncertainties that altogether constitute a fascinating research agenda for emerging professions as well as for CSR.

Perhaps the trickiest debate is whether CSR is a profession after all? Andreas Werr had a 'hard time seeing CSR as a profession'. Rahul Mitra and Christopher Wickert underlined the importance of time. We are speaking of a young profession (if any) which renders comparison with traditional profession perilous, Jean-Pascal Gond proposes that we are speaking not only about one but many emerging CSR sub-professions, while Daniel Muzio connected this question back to the ongoing debate in the profession literature about definitions of profession (Muzio et al. 2011). To move forwards, perhaps we need to find new indicators of professionalization for emerging occupations such as the creation of education programs that have emerged over the past 20 years in the case of CSR (Gond and Brès 2019; Risi and Wickert 2017). Those new indicators seem more related to soft laws, education, and community-building than to hard law and organizational forms (e.g. licensing and credentialing through professional associations).

Another possible approach is that we are not facing a profession *per se* but a slightly different phenomenon, such as 'organizational professionals' (Reed 1996; Daudigeos 2013; Noordegraaf 2015), 'internal activists' (Wickert and Schaefer 2015; Carrington, Zwick, and Neville 2018), 'issue professionalism' (Henriksen and Seabrooke 2016; Wickert and de Bakker 2018), or hybrid professions combining different logics (Blomgren and Waks 2015; Ghadiri, Gond, and Brès 2015; Kurunmäki 2004; Noordegraaf 2015). In this case, we need to delve into the similarities, relations, and differences between all these ideas of occupation.

Our dialogue also raises a more general question about emerging professions: is the existence of a unified body of knowledge still a requisite to speak of professionalization nowadays? And if not, how professions unite without a knowledge base? We have seen the importance of common goals for emerging

professions. However, if CSR professionals are mostly driven by a common goal, as an ‘issue professionalism’ (Henriksen and Seabrooke 2016) carried by ‘internal activists’ (Wickert and Schaefer 2015), how then can it be distinguished from a social movement? What are the different steps that turn a social movement into a profession? What does it say about the overall role of professions in society? And about the overall role of social movements for professions?

One of the biggest questions regarding the future of the CSR profession is about whether CSR should evolve decentralized –being adopted by established organizational professions (e.g. accountants) –or remain a specialist function. Our dialogue seems to indicate that specializing in CSR will probably not disappear any time soon. However, if the decentralized hypothesis holds true, this opens intriguing research avenues. What are the consequences of the appropriation of CSR by other professions? Does it dilute the transformative dimension in CSR or on the contrary makes it more impactful? What is left for CSR professionals in this dynamic of decentralization? How do CSR professionals and established professionals influence each other, and what does this say more generally about dynamics of traditional and emerging profession? How CSR decentralization will affect external perceptions, in particular stakeholders’ perceptions?

Our dialogue also left us pondering whether or not CSR should actually become a profession. What about the kind of deep personal commitment and self-sacrifice that have fueled the diffusion of CSR in the first place? Or the contentious spirit which once challenged organizations (Tams and Marshall 2011; Mitra and Fyke 2017)? On the other hand, perhaps a more dispassionate (or more ‘professional?’) practice of CSR has its merit, as shown in the idea of ‘tempered radicals’ (Meyerson and Scully 1995)? This has consequences also regarding how CSR professional will be perceived by other organizational actors (McShane and Cunningham 2012). The professionalization of CSR might also reinforce concerns about the managerialization of CSR (Edelman et al. 2001) and about the marketization of social issues (Fleming and Jones 2013). As first steps toward possible research avenues, we found interesting parallels with caring oriented profession (e.g. development worker or nurse) who had to maintain

authenticity while institutionalizing or professionalizing, and with other forms of ‘issue professionalism’ (Henriksen and Seabrooke 2016).

Finally, our dialogue reveals that the cultural context in which the professionalization of CSR is taking place is largely a blind spot in the current discussions. This knowledge gap was pointed out in the professions literature too (Adams 2015). Yet, this dialogue shows the potential of CSR studies to bridge this gap. For instance, regarding CSR practitioners’ identities and values, research results significantly differ between the Swedish (Furusten et al. 2013; Alexius et al. 2017) and the North American context (Brès and Gond 2014; Mitra and Fyke 2017). This cultural dimension is very likely to become even more important, as CSR is developing at a fast pace outside Occidental contexts. For instance, the Indian context (Mitra 2012), and to some extent also Chinese (Long et al. 2015), currently provide opportunities to observe the professionalization of CSR in completely different institutional environments. This question of the cultural context is even more complex since CSR is most likely a global born profession, which differs from traditional professions (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011). Being global-born, CSR nonetheless needs to translate locally in cultural contexts. Therefore, the study of CSR professionalization also offers the fascinating opportunity to understand the local versus global dynamics in emerging professions.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper is based on a panel symposium held at the 78th Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Chicago (US) on Monday 13th August 2018. We thank the audience of the symposium for their valuable questions and comments that helped develop the discussion further.
2. Principles for Responsible Investment.
3. Recently renamed 3BL - <http://www.3blassociation.com/insights/magazines>.
4. <https://iwe.unisg.ch/de/weiterbildung/csr-kompakt>.

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